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ENVIRONMENT AND KOREA

By Lynde Selden, A.B., for some years a resident of Korea

At the dawn of the new era of eastern progress, the eyes of the western world were turned toward the Orient for the first time from a broader standpoint than that of mere commercialism. They saw there three nations, alike in many respects, yet having somewhat different modes of life, physical characteristics and mental qualities: Japan, a pushing vital force; China, a slow-moving Goliath; and Korea, in spite of a population of over twelve million, a nonentity. What has made this latter so backward and unreceptive to new ideas? What has made her capabilities less cogent than those of China and Japan? Is it because for centuries she was the "cowed and hermit vassal of China?" or because she was overshadowed on two sides by foes numerically stronger than herself? Or is there some fundamental reason back of it all which has kept her from that development which would make her more nearly the equal of her great neighbors? And further, now that her national identity has been swallowed up and merged with that of Japan, will the so-called Hermit people arouse from their lethargy and become of some value to the world? Let us first study their environment.

The one-time Empire of Korea is a peninsula stretching southward from Manchuria for about six hundred miles, its northernmost boundary lying along latitude 43°N., its southernmost point lying near the thirty-third parallel. The northern boundary consists of two rivers, the one flowing east and the other west from their sources in the Ever-White Mountains. Being a peninsula, the remaining boundaries are well defined. On the east is the Sea of Japan, on the west is the Yellow Sea, and on the south are the Straits of Shimoneseiki, or Korean Straits. These boundaries, well marked for political purposes, have made difficult

invasions attempted by both the Chinese and Japanese at various times during the history of the peninsula. In the centuries around the beginning of the Christian era the armies of the Chinese Emperors of various dynasties have crossed the Yalu, in coöperation with strong navies sent to the west coast, and have laid waste Korean territory, on some occasions, however, being repulsed by Korean arms. The history of Korea has been an almost continuous struggle against one or the other of her neighbors. Several times the steadily progressing Japanese crossed the narrow straits at the south and have likewise laid waste or been repulsed. But we know of no time when the Koreans have taken the offensive. From 913 A.D. on, the entire peninsula has been ruled as one kingdom, but even with united strength, Korea has had a difficult task to maintain her national existence. In her efforts to do this, she maintained an exclusion policy, the success of which has given her the appropriate sobriquet, "The Hermit Nation." For years she refused to allow alien merchants to enter the peninsula, and even the Japanese fishermen, who are by far better seamen than the Koreans, were prohibited from selling in Korea fish caught off Korean territory. This exclusion policy accounts to a great extent for the backwardness of the country, but the policy itself was made possible through certain environmental conditions, and to those conditions we must look for the ultimate causes for the present status of Korea. It was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that the peninsula was opened up to foreigners through the action of the United States. From that time till 1905, when Japan and Russia were at war, Korea was little known and of still less importance to the western world. From the time when the Emperor's seal was affixed to the documents signing away the independence of the nation, under Japan's skillful diplomacy, Korea has been opening up as an addition to the world's treasure-house and as a new field for science and commercialism.

Turning now to the physiography of Korea, we find that the peninsula is distinctly mountainous. Dr. Koto, a Japanese geologist, draws a very forcible parallel between

Korea and Italy orographically, for both have a central axis consisting of a range of mountains extending the length of the peninsula, and falling off toward the southern end. Both send off lateral spurs, and on the north both are divided by transverse ranges sinking to well-marked lowlands. However, the two countries differ in outer form and geological structure. In the case of Italy, the Apennines run through the very center of the peninsula, while in Korea the axial range is very near the east coast. Again, Italy contains many young formations, while so far as we can determine, Korea is mainly composed of Archaic and Paleozoic formations.

For the purpose of study Korea may be divided into two parts. If a line were drawn between Chinampo on the west central coast and Wonsan on the east central, we should have approximately these two sections.

The northern section is probably the oldest part of the peninsula, containing for the most part strongly folded Archaic formations. With the exception of two regions, the Kaima plateau and the Chyo-Syon lowland district, this section is extremely rugged.

In the southern section we find a marked difference between the east and the west. On the east the axial range falls away sharply to a narrow but fairly fertile coastal plain, marked by few and insignificant spurs, and cut by few streams.

The western section of southern Korea is much broader than the eastern, and the axial range throws off lateral ranges and spurs which break up the country into a chaos of corrugated and precipitous hills and steep-sided valleys, in each of which rapid perennial streams cut their way to the coast. As one goes west from the axial range, the valleys flatten out into miniature plains, but in no part of Korea is there any stretch of level land that deserves the name of plain.

The peninsula, while in the main of volcanic origin, has no active volcanoes, the last eruption of the only known volcanic mountain, Hal-la San, occurring in 1007 A.D. Korea is also surprisingly free from earthquakes.

The coasts of Korea appear to have had a particularly strong influence on the character of the Koreans. The east coast, washed by the Sea of Japan, is steep and rock-bound. During an early period the floor of the sea was raised, forming a coastal plain, but wave action, cutting back into it, has left the shore abrupt and forbidding. This coastal plain is so narrow, from three to six miles wide, that even with heavy precipitation there is no chance for rivers to develop and consequently there has been very little dissection due to water action. For that reason, there are few harbors or roadsteads, Wonsan and Port Lazareff being the only ones worthy of note.

The west coast, though rocky and forbidding, is unlike the east coast in that it is drowned, dotted with numberless islands and fringed with indentations which make the shore look like an archipelago of small land masses. Of the two hundred islands along this coast, the greater part are barren rocks, with an occasional fir-clad peak, only a few of which are inhabited. Having dropped at a very early period the sea bottom tends to come nearer the surface of the water, and new land is yearly reclaimed. This is brought about by the action of the rivers which brings down quantities of silt and deposits it on the sea bottom. This shallow sea floor is a contributory cause for the size of the tides which along this coast rise and fall from twenty to forty feet, in some places the low tide mark being a mile or more farther out to sea than the high tide mark. The tidal wave, swinging into the Yellow Sea from the south, is pushed up on this floor, since it is prevented from making its escape by the narrowness of the Straits of Shimoneseiki. The reverse of this same reasoning would also account for the small tides on the east coast, which range from three to six feet. The fact that the tides on the west coast are so great, and rise and fall with such rapidity, does anything but facilitate navigation, and added to this, the frequent heavy summer fogs make the irregular coast a source of great anxiety to mariners.

The south coast alone is fitted for navigation. Though this is deeply indented and irregular, the indentations are

capacious and well-sheltered, and the best harbors in the peninsula, Fusan and Masampo, are found here, at the mouths of longitudinal rivers. Were the entire coast of Korea of the same character as the southern coast, the history of Korea might have been somewhat different, for the Koreans might have developed into a sea-faring people. But nine-tenths of their coast line was prejudicial to such a development.

None of the rivers of Korea are large, two only being navigable for more than a few miles from their mouths. Being a mountainous country, roads are poor and uncertain, and their upkeep almost impossible. Of other means of internal communication, very little need be said. There is only one pass over the axial range that is convenient and accessible, namely, the depression of Chyuk-Ka-Rjong. Such means of intercommunication have hindered rather than helped the unification of the peninsula. They have also assisted in the development of a sedentary people.

Having in mind the physiography of Korea, we can now turn to its climate.

Korea lies in the North Temperate Zone at about the latitude of New England, and one would think that, inasmuch as they are situated in corresponding parts of their respective continents, the two districts would have much the same climate. But we do not find this true. For nine months of the year, the climate is superb, but the summer months of June, July and August are rainy, and the damp heat throughout the peninsula is extremely enervating.

Korea has very clear winters, only slight precipitation occurring, the prevailing winds being northwest. Little precipitation can occur as these winds come over the dry steppes of Siberia, and are warmed after coming over the mountain barrier in the north, thus holding in suspense any moisture which they may contain. The eastern seaboard is washed by a cold arctic current, and on this account the winters are extreme. The west coast, excluding a small portion in the south affected by the Black Stream, has likewise clear cold winters, many of the bays and inlets becoming icebound.

In summer, the southeast monsoons bring heavy rains during the months of July and August, the precipitation being heaviest on the east where the rainbearing winds first strike. The damp heat which results is not healthful, but especially is this true in the southern section of the peninsula. The annual rainfall is about forty inches, thirty-five of which fall during the rainy season.

The striking characteristic of Korean climate is the absence of cyclonic storms. This is probably due to the fact that Japan acts as a shield, for, lying as it does at the northern end of the typhoon area, it drives the storms that come up the coast of China out to sea, where they wear themselves out. The absence of cyclonic storms results in a decidedly monotonous climate, one day practically the same as the last, with no frequent barometric changes such as continually occur in New England. In the rainy season more rain falls than is necessary for vegetation, and floods are quite common. And after the rainy season vegetation must live on whatever moisture has been stored up, provided it has survived the floods. Western Korea is handicapped in an additional way. The valleys are transversal, and in the summer when the sun beats down, these valley bottoms become veritable bake ovens, almost uninhabitable. The cooling effect of the monsoon is lost because it blows across the valleys, the hills not being high enough to deflect its course. The heat is terrific, vegetation becomes scorched, and cultivation has to be taken up on the mountain tops where the heat is not so intense, but the soil is infertile.

In the north where the altitude is greater and evaporation less rapid, the soil is better suited for cultivation, but the very factors which have caused that have also caused a very heavy growth of forest. This makes agriculture arduous even where level land can be found.

Korea is undoubtedly a great treasure house of minerals, especially in the north where gold is at present being successfully mined. Copper, iron, silver, manganese and other semi-precious metals are to be found throughout that district. Coal of an anthracite type is found in the south-

east, but larger coal fields of the lignite variety are being developed in the central part of the country.

Conforming with the climate of Korea, the flora of the north is Forest, while that of the south is Herbaceous. No distinct line can be drawn between the two floral provinces, however, as from south to north the country becomes increasingly forested. As one enters the peninsula from the south, the hills are noticeably bare, but they are covered with a variety of coarse bamboo grass. Here and there a lone tree is seen, but usually these are only on the hilltops. This scarcity of trees in the south is due to the same cause which makes agriculture difficult. Only the hardiest vegetation can live. On the hilltops, where the sun's rays are not so keenly felt, a few trees manage to live, but as a rule these are stunted and knotty. In the north the other extreme is reached, and the forests are particularly dense.

It is practically impossible to divide Korea into zoological provinces for the reason that the fauna of the north and south are found intermingled at various times of the year. As a general thing, however, we find the fur-bearing animals in the highland of the north. The tiger, a huge magnificent beast, is widely distributed over the country, though more especially in the north. His ferocity has greatly influenced the customs and folk-lore of the Koreans, for we find that his majesty is the symbol of strength and power. Tiger-hunters wear tiger claws as charms, and there was a time when the bones of the animal were made into an absolutely infallible courage-producing medicine.

Birds are numberless; many, however, do not live in the peninsula, but make it a stopping place in their annual migrations. Bustards, pheasant, duck, crane, snipe and other game birds make the country a veritable paradise for the sportsman.

Korea has three important domestic animals: the horse, the ass, and the ox. The horse is a small animal, but strong and hardy, and excellent as a pack animal. Long continued cruelty and inbreeding have made them vicious. The bad roads prevent their being used as draft animals, and as the Koreans are not a nation of horsemen, they are

not used for travelling purposes. Up to the time when the rickshaw was introduced, asses were used as the chief means of travel. The Korean much preferred the ass to the horse, because the former moves slowly, and it is beneath the dignity of a Korean to show the least sign of haste. Cattle and oxen are abundant in the south, where they are of excellent breed, resembling very closely the English Short-Horns. They are used for the most part for agricultural purposes, but occasionally as draft animals. Dogs are of course common, but aside from their use as a delicacy for the Korean palate, they are worthless.

Having seen the general characteristics of the Koreans' geographical environment, we may now turn to certain phases of human phenomena which we have not seen before. The first of these is concerned with the physical characteristics of the people. There are roughly two types of people in the peninsula: the hunters of the mountain districts, and the lowland people of the south and central. Very little need be said about the former, for they are not numerous, and are quite different from the man that is commonly known as "the Korean." In general, the hunters of the north are larger than the typical Korean, their superior physique being due undoubtedly to harsher life-conditions. They have the reputation for being brave, a reputation the average Korean might well envy.

The people of the south and central being "the" Koreans, I shall dwell more upon their characteristics than upon those of the hunters of the north.

The Korean undoubtedly belongs to the Mongol family, but his origin is unknown. One theory, however, sounds plausible, and whether or not we accept it, it may prove of interest.

In pre-Aryan times, a primitive race came from the Iranian plateau across the mountains of western Tibet and Chinese Turkestan, and spread into the valleys of the Yangtse and Hoangho rivers in central China. These were the ancestors of the Chinese of today. This migration took place before the rise of the pastoral age; but with the pastoral era came more sedentary tendencies, and com-

munication between these emigrants and their former habitat was abandoned. A second exodus from the Iranian plateau took place some time after. At the junction of the Himalaya and Kuen Lung mountains, instead of crossing the barriers as had the first exodus, this migratory stream split into two parts, one passing south into India, and the other following the Kuen Lung range onto the steppes of northeastern Siberia. An eastern branch of this latter division came into Korea. After many years, the Iranians who had gone down into India were driven out by the oncoming Aryans, who forced them to migrate into the Malay peninsula, from whence they spread up the eastern coast of China into Japan. And some stragglers even reached Korea. Thus the second exodus completely surrounded the first.

According to this theory, the Koreans are the result of an intermixture of the northern and southern divisions of the second migratory stream and the natives of the peninsula who were there prior to the advent of this Iranian blood.

However the race originated, the typical Korean of today is fairly tall, the average height being about five feet five inches. He has dark hair, dark oblique eyes, and a tinge of bronze in his skin. His cheek bones are high, his lips thin, and his nose quite flat. His ears are small, and his brow fairly well developed. His hands and feet are small and well-formed, and his physique good. Such a type of human being seems above the average Japanese or Chinese, and yet we find his mental qualities decidedly inferior.

The Korean is an ideal child of nature: superstitious, simple, patient, and ignorant. These characteristics are the attributes of an agricultural people, which is exactly what the Koreans are. Seventy-five per cent of the population are peaceful plodding farmers. Their greatest failing is lack of energy and initiative. Mr. Longford in his book called the *Story of Korea* makes the following statement:

In spite of a bountiful soil, abundant rainfall, a splendid climate, undoubted resources and mineral wealth, and no earthquakes, the peasants, physically strong and enduring and not inferior to their industrious neighbors, with physical courage like the Japanese, have no incentive to industry through the ruthless graft of the Yangbans.

Mr. Longford's statement is no doubt true, but he has assigned to one cause what I should assign to several. The Yangbans are the nobles or near-nobles of the Korean court. At first they were recruited from the sons of kings born by concubines, but later they received the title through bribery and other influential means. The Yangban considers himself above work, and so he lives by graft.¹ Absentee landlordism, high taxes and the rapacity of this social class in the past have ground down the peasants, and have helped to take away from them the stimulus of accomplishment so necessary for all people. But there are other more remote causes which account for this lack of industry and initiative, and which apply to all classes, noble, middle, and peasant.

In the first place, had not the very inhospitable coasts and the mountainous character of the country forced upon the Korean the sedentary life of a farmer, he would probably have developed sea-faring tendencies which would have brought him in touch with other civilizations. He would have absorbed new ideas and new customs. In addition, he would have become inured to hardships, and more capable of defending himself against the rapacity of the Yangbans.

In the second place, the climate is decidedly monotonous. In cyclonic regions, where the climate is constantly changing, people's minds are continually active, for it is a scientific fact that the human brain cells are more active in an ever-changing climate than under stable barometric conditions. The physical and psychic effect of such monotony is bound to be felt in the character of the people. The result is that they are listless, lack energy, and are too lazy to fight even for their rights. Perhaps they do not lack physical courage, but they fail to show opposition toward their enemies. They have not the necessary initiative.

In the third place, the Koreans are between two fires, Japan, on the one hand, and China on the other. These two aggressive nations have pressed and oppressed Korea for

¹ The annexation of Korea by Japan has done away with most of this graft by Korean officials.

centuries, and this alone would necessarily dampen their courage and vitality.

And these three factors, together with the tyranny of the Yangbans, have driven the Koreans to become "a helpless, apathetic and broken-spirited people." Their industries, their arts, and their religion bear evidence of this.

Agriculture, their chief occupation, is carried on in a very indifferent manner. This is not due entirely to the character of the Korean. Too much rainfall is just as bad for crops as too little. Rice is practically the only staple that grows under exceptionally moist conditions. A fertile soil loses most of its nitrogen by leaching under very wet conditions, so that in Korea the rainy months of July and August greatly hinder plant growth. Famine and cholera during the nineteenth century were only too common as a direct result of this.

The chief staples, rice, millet, bearded wheat, oats, barley and sorghum, are carelessly cultivated, and are inferior in quantity and quality to the same staples grown in Japan and China. Tobacco and cotton, which is grown in the south, are nearly worthless.

The wealth of mineral deposits had scarcely been scratched until the advent of foreign capital. However, this was in great measure due to the lack of efficient facilities for mining development. Gold mining was confined to placer washing, and the Koreans were unable to develop their mines below the water level. The coal, iron, silver, galena and manganese were practically untouched until recent years. Copper seems to have been the only mineral that was mined successfully, and it is estimated that from 15 per cent to 20 per cent of the copper was lost through careless treatment and inefficient blast furnaces.

Commerce has never developed, as the Koreans have never adapted themselves to the uninviting character of the coasts. Imports and exports are carried almost entirely in Chinese or Japanese ships.

A thousand years ago China introduced into Korea many of her finer arts and crafts. Satsuma, Cloisonné, and imari ware, the pride of Japanese art today, were among them.

These were developed to a high degree, but only temporarily, for the character of the Korean would not admit of sustained effort along any line. Gradually these fine arts have been forgotten, but during the first years of their inception, the Koreans introduced them into Japan, where as we all know, they have gained in beauty and individuality.

Korean architecture is another evidence of Korean inefficiency. Although the peninsula is entirely free from earthquakes, in no part of the country are dwelling houses built substantially, for permanence. The possible exceptions are the emperors' palaces and the temples and monasteries. In the south the walls are constructed of mud, plastered over a network of coarse twisted grass which holds the mud in place. The roof is thatched with a kind of reedy straw, which is held in place by a mud weight along the peak. On account of its scarcity, wood is very little used, except for beams. In the central part of the peninsula, where wood is more abundant, it is used in a greater degree for the framework of the house. This is more substantial, and capable of holding a heavier roof, so that tiles of a coarse variety are used in place of thatching. In the north, where wood is abundant, the houses are made almost entirely of wood, the roofing being of birch bark.

Again, in their religion, the Koreans have chosen the form which is characteristic of their child-like dispositions. The chief religious sect of the country is Ancestor worship, which is common to all classes. This is undoubtedly the oldest type of religion in the world, and is found in all sedentary peoples. Association of people with environment during lifetime breeds association after death, provided the environment remains unchanged. Buddhism was introduced into Korea by Chinese immigrants during the fourth century A.D., but Buddhism required energy, and soon became discredited. From the tenth to the fourteenth centuries it was again in vogue, but then the moral code of Confucius was found to be more compatible with the Korean character, and Buddhism was abolished. Until within the last few years, Buddhist monks were not allowed to enter walled cities, as it was considered bad luck.

Taoism, a form of spirit worship which has for its major premise the belief that Good will ultimately triumph over Evil, was brought into Korea along with Buddhism. Buddhism is no longer in favor, but we still find many evidences of Taoistic beliefs in the daily life of the Korean. Taoism is at its best in the Korean funeral, where the childish fancies of these people run riot. The following description, though a digression, may prove of interest.

A Korean funeral is not an impressive affair. The one idea embodied in the series of rites performed over the deceased until his burial is to keep evil spirits from descending upon his defenceless body. The catafalque in which the body is born is a gaudy affair, adorned with hideous paintings of demons and animals, intended to frighten away the evil ones. A second and similar catafalque is borne along just ahead of the one bearing the body, but this latter is of course empty. This is a deception which is practised to prevent the evil spirits from knowing in which catafalque the body lies. They will be in a quandary to know what to do, and will probably descend upon the first in line, the empty one. As the funeral proceeds up the street, the paid mourners who bear the catafalques sway from side to side, groaning and emitting the most sorrowless lamentations, better for waking the dead than for driving away evil spirits. The swaying from side to side is one of the most essential parts of the ceremony, for it prevents the evil ones from making a good landing when they attempt to descend upon the catafalque. When the procession reaches the gate of the city, it comes to a halt. A number of the mourners then have a tug of war, in which the good spirits invariably pull the bad spirits out of the city toward the graveyard. The funeral then continues to the burying ground.

And now let us turn to Japan in Korea.

The year 1910 marks the beginning of a new era in Korean history. In that year Japan annexed the country as an integral part of the Island Empire. A form of provincial government, vested in the hands of a Governor General and assistants, was created, which took over the entire control of Korean affairs, subject only to the government at Tokyo.

Administrative departments were created on a systematic basis, with a view to developing this new Province of Chosen to its utmost and cementing it to Japan. Assimilation is the product of years, and we cannot look far enough ahead to the time when the aims and ambitions of the Koreans will be one with those of the Japanese. There is and always has been that feeling of mutual contempt which the mailed fist of the conqueror has only aggravated. It will require years to blot out this feeling, but that it will come eventually is very probable.

And the effect on the future inhabitants of the peninsula of that environment which has so influenced Korean destiny will vary inversely with the power exerted by the central government of Japan.